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# Lord, When Did We See You Hungry?

Matthew 25:40 and other Scripture verses encourage us to extend a helping hand to those in need. No where is this call to action more challenging than among the poorest of the poor...

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The Catholic Week

"Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours..."

Walking along the dusty pathway of Riverton City, a nickname given to the seething slum built on a garbage dump in the heart of Kingston, Jamaica, it was difficult for me to believe that any blessing, now or in the future was set aside for these people. The Scripture verse played like a cruel joke in the face of makeshift scrap wood shelters, corrugated zinc and cardboard sidings that lined the roadway.

The hard facts about Riverton City were neatly typed out in the press release "Food For The Poor" provided to my group at Miami Airport. I had studied them and meticulously jotted down notes as we flew from Miami to Kingston. I had done my homework. I had my camera and my notebook. I was prepared.

"Over 5,000 people occupy Riverton City, living off the rotted refuse delivered daily from Kingston's luxury hotels..." Black type on white paper; statistics read easily from the safe distance of an airplane; far removed from the concrete reality.

I loaded my camera, raised it and began to document the surroundings at Riverton City. Naked children swarmed me as busily as the flies, reaching out to touch my watch and camera bag, stretching to reach my hair. They squatted at my feet and rubbed my shoes, intrigued by my leather shoe strings. They took my hand and pulled me down the path to meet their friends. The smell was overwhelming. The reality was unbearable.

My heart stood at half-mast and I wondered where the face of God was hiding.

The entourage from the Food For The Poor relief agency moved on through a maze of tin and wood until we came to the squatter city's one source of water — a single pipe at the

edge of the dump, facing the street. Inhabitants of Riverton City waded through the mud, garbage and filth to get to this source. From the pipe, they catch their water for drinking and carry it back to their families. If they bathe, it is within the humiliating view of the traffic along the highway. There are no toilets and no drainage. Privacy is only a fairy tale in Riverton City.

We moved on. The van now full of quietly angry and puzzled journalists, re-loading their cameras, rethinking their priorities, and guiltily packing away their film. Conversation lost its charm. Children along the roadway looked up from the dust cloud and waved goodbye to anonymous faces staring out at them from the safety of a van that passed slowly through their living nightmare. Images matched my statistics now, and the distance didn't feel safe anymore.

The remaining days of the pilgrimage continued with busy visits to Salvation Army feeding stations; to Father Gregory Ramkissoon of the Mustard Seed Ministry, a habitat for abandoned, retarded and crippled children; to the Golden Age Home, another shelter for the discarded, young and old. With each visit, the distance closed between my clinical definition of suffering and what I saw. The statistics spelled out in black and white began to breathe as they took on flesh and blood. Sometimes I saw the face of God; sometimes I didn't. Always, I saw the generic bond of poverty, indigenous to the destitute of Jamaica.

I faced the final visit with mixed emotions as the van drove down a mile-long driveway to Bellevue Hospital, a state-run hospital for the mentally ill of all ages. Time was running out. Our bags were packed. The notebooks were full. My children were at home designing rainbow-colored welcome signs. The pilgrimage with Food For The Poor was almost over.

A nurse unlocked the rusty gate and led us in through an overgrown walkway. She reached up and secured the gate's

lock behind us. Sounds, waiting for a victim, found me. Indiscernible wails, escaping from dark rooms, echoed across the yard, promising sights that were even worse. Mentally ill young people roamed the breezeway, tearing at their clothes. Some were able to walk. Others could only crawl. Most were naked and all were pitiful beyond words. Cameras clicked and then grew uniformly still in a

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mutual conspiracy of consideration. It felt perverse, somehow, to capture on film this degree of suffering.

We moved in a huddled group down the hallways, holding hands, afraid to look but unable to avoid seeing, trying to find God among the wreckage.

Across the corridor, a 22-year-old volunteer from Stanford University was carefully rearranging the clothing on a young girl. The volunteer was a psychology major with bright, curly red hair and an easy smile. She had offered her summer to Bellevue. I stood and watched as the face of God smiled down on the face of a dirty child, the wall of indifference was breached, and I knew that, for me, there would never again be a safe distance from which I could observe the suffering of others.

I came to Jamaica from a world of fast food and easy answers. A world where uncomfortable situations were avoided at all costs, and suffering was something I prayed would stay far from my doorstep. A world where it was easier for me to offer a politically correct platitude than to extend a helping hand. I came from a world that tilted on its axis and blew apart in the short span of four Jamaican days.

There is no such thing as a safe distance in the Kingdom of God. There never has been. There never will be.

For more information about the work of Food for the Poor, write to: Food For The Poor - Dept. 8188, 550 S.W. 12th Avenue, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442.



**TOP PHOTO:** Children in "Riverton City" are reduced to salvaging in the dump for clothing and other "useful" discards. These youngsters are often uneducated because they are orphans or because their families are unable to afford school expenses. In addition to providing education scholarships for poor children, the Food For The Poor organization is now working to improve basic living conditions in the community.

**SIDE PHOTOS:** This shack-like school (see top photo inset) had no desks or supplies, so Food For The Poor rebuilt the school and provided it with furniture and materials. Today, the school provides children in the slums with a good, basic education.

